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ABSTRACT

Using the news media as resource material in the classroom is an excellent and under-utilized way to bring the reality and diversity of external politics into the classroom. Using that external reality in combination with the internal reality of the schools as unique political communities can provide a more complete and realistic civic education. The development of civic competency in student-citizens requires not only an abstract comprehension of political systems, but also the generation of applied political and media skills. One major emphasis of citizenship education concerns the interdependence of peoples and political entities throughout the world. Television in particular brings the concept of a global village into the classroom and should be used to heighten students' interest in and awareness of civic education. Other major themes of civic education concern the use of the news media as an instructional tool for political systems education, the ubiquitous nature of politics in public affairs reporting, and the importance of teaching competency in coping with bureaucratic systems. (PPB)

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Global Political Concepts In and Out of the "Global Village":

Comments on "A Future for Civic Education"

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Introduction

Civic education as taught in most schools in the 8th and 9th grades has been rightfully the target of considerable constructive criticism. A subject that is inherently interesting, since it deals with so many important aspects of personal and public life, often becomes dry, boring, and seemingly irrelevant and is consequently, perhaps rightfully, relegated to a minor curricular niche.

The foundation discipline underlying most traditional civics courses is political science, or more descriptively, government. The focus is usually institutional and procedural rather than behavioral. Facts and descriptions about government and politics are conveyed, usually along with some normative prescriptions about democracy and constitutionalism. All are presented in a rather abstract, other worldly manner. The behavioral revolution which impacted political science about 25 years ago, and which emphasizes people's actual behavior and its quantification, has impinged only imperceptibly on civics teaching, if at all. The findings of other related disciplines which deal with people's behavior--psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics, to name a few related social sciences--are typically omitted from the civics domain, thus making citizenship education even less interesting and more artificial.

Cognizant of the remoteness of traditional civic education from the daily concerns and activities of students, Michael Nelson has proposed the use of the news media as an aid in promoting effective citizenship training. This paper elaborates upon this useful and welcome approach. Moreover, it advocates an additional approach to make civic education more real and relevant--the conceptualization of the school itself as a political system and the teaching of basic political concepts as manifested in everyday school

activities. Additionally, the incorporation of the modern approaches and discoveries of political science in addition to those of other related disciplines are also suggested.

Global Political Concepts and Competence

Political science has a great deal to contribute to the teaching of citizenship for the future, more than is commonly perceived. Most civic educators would recognize those contributions of the discipline which relate to the structure and operation of our governments in our constitutional system. This forms the primary content of most traditional civic courses. Fewer probably are aware of those political phenomenon or principles which are universal, or global, in nature, and which exist outside, as well as inside, government. Their presence is included in the schools. Among these global concepts which form the basis for investigation by political scientists are authority, legitimacy, interest representation, mobilization, decisionmaking, political communication, influence and persuasion, and others. These not only help define the intellectual domain of political science but can also be the key concepts which underlie an effective civic education. Focusing on these generic and fundamental concepts may serve to resolve some of the ambiguities and difficulties which Michael Nelson accurately points out as inherent difficulties in teaching the political content of 8th and 9th grade civics courses.

Professor Nelson points out that there is some ambiguity about whether civic educators are teaching a subject which is remote and distant from the daily lives of most students or whether they are teaching a set of applied skills which, for the most part, will be utilized several years in the future. I believe that this is a challenge which can be resolved by teaching concept-related skills which are both immediately applicable and also

generalizable to activities in which citizens will participate in their adult lives, in other words, developing political competence. This may be defined as the ability of persons to behave effectively, in their roles as citizens, in processes related to group governance.

The other challenge which Professor Nelson indicates is faced by civic educators is that lessons about effective participation must be taught at the same time while developing a more abstract comprehension of how the political system works. Focusing on the concept of competence may serve also to bring these together. A focus on competence means that not only must a person be able to perform certain functions, i.e., skill building, but that he or she must do so intelligently, that is, based on a thorough understanding, i.e., comprehension, of the consequences of his or her action.

The Media and Political Knowledge

Professor Nelson's thesis is that one way to teach competence, that is, devising ways in which civic education will be both useful and interesting, is to teach individuals to be intelligent newspaper readers and television news watchers. In introducing this approach, Professor Nelson makes a very telling statement, which could also have been the basis for the much broader view of civic education espoused in this paper, when he states that "habits formed and techniques developed in schools promise to carry forth uninterrupted into adulthood." Indeed this is a primary finding of one of the fields of study in political science--that of political socialization. Although Nelson presents this thesis in reference to interactions with the news media, it is a principle which can and should be applied regardless of the particular skill or competence involved. Perhaps more precisely descriptive of teaching civic education through the use of the news media is Nelson's statement that teaching students to be intelligent newspaper readers

and watchers of television news serves to "fill a real gap in our political system."

In order to understand the operation of the political system, Nelson proposes that one should use the current events reported in newspapers, to illustrate the real-life manifestation of general political processes, such as lawmaking, rather than relate an abstract hypothetical description of, for example, "how a bill becomes a law." In this regard, Nelson states that "students should be taught to see the connection between news events and daily life." This is a key concept which could be greatly elaborated. Students can look to the media for reports of general processes which are in operation, regardless of whether they occur at city hall, the state house, or in the federal capitol.

Nelson points out that one of the major problems of using television news for civic lessons is that that medium tends to focus on the dramatic and the entertaining--on, for example, candidates appearances, strategies, and tactics rather than on the public principles and issues which underlie these activities. On the other hand, because of its flair for the dramatic, television can directly exhibit to students interesting political behavior which is much more dramatic and has a greater impact on them than does the kind of behavior that is typically described in civic textbooks and which cannot be as dramatically presented in newspapers. Examples cited are televised protests and demonstrations and depictions of actual lobbying efforts on several issues. The "global village" of television can thus increase interest among students, a necessary prerequisite to participating in public affairs and heighten their sense of potential direct involvement.

A few words of caution are in order here. Educators should be urged to recognize and teach about the limitations and biases of the news media.

These skills of "recognizing limitations" can be applied in analyses not only of the news media but also in studies of other major institutions. All major organizations have biases and also are limited by their ideology, resources, and time constraints.

Another caveat about the use of television as a source of citizenship training is in order. We must guard against its use inculcating a passivity which is antithetical to the ideals of an active participating citizenry. Television is an unparalleled source of information. Yet it is a one way transmission of messages, including communications from the government, to the mass citizenry. Democratic citizenship is not meant to be a spectator sport. Persons responsible for developing a civic curriculum based on television must figure out how to transform this one way bombardment of messages into various forms of more active citizenship skills. Although information must form the basis for activity, both comprehension and participation must be promoted through civics learning.

Diversity of Groups and Disciplines

Lessons in diversity inevitably spring from the use of media. Membership, via TV, in the global village means being a member of a political community which is comprised of a plethora of national and ethnic cultures. This vicarious membership in a multi-ethnic global society can provide foresightful lessons into what is increasingly a multi-cultural, ethnically diverse society of the 21st century United States. That politics is a group-based activity is a fundamental finding of political science. Yet civics education usually subordinates the importance of groups to an alleged individual relationship between isolated citizens and the government. In America, significant groups increasingly will be non-Anglo in ethnicity. Television and its introduction to worldwide ethnic diversity may be used to

preview, and teach about, the future ethnic group politics of the United States.

Using the media in civics education requires analytical tools from disciplines other than the traditional political science and history of the civics course. The media is a mirror of reality in all its fascinating complexity; its features certainly transcend any one professional discipline. Real life problems are interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary, that is, they do not recognize those somewhat artificial categories which disciplinary experts have created in order to become more expert in their own analysis of what is, after all, only one slice of reality. Newspaper and television accounts are replete with stories which offer diversity and the subsequent opportunity to bring the perspectives of several disciplines to bear on them. In their main thrust, some reports basically deal with politics, others with workings of the economic system. Some are more sociological or anthropological in approach. The focus of other new items are mainly historical in nature; all stories take place in a geographical context. However, even though a particular story may have one or two "disciplinary" emphases, it is far more likely that major news features, and most certainly an entire TV news program or issue of a newspaper, reflect interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary topics, that is, the nonsegmented realities of everyday life.

The Ubiquity of Politics

Much of the thrust of public affairs reports is by nature political; this is particularly so in election years. The campaign and the coming fall elections offer many stories about public opinion polls and related activities of the election campaign. Nelson's perusal of USA Today was dominated by news of politics and government at all levels. Indeed, Professor Nelson states that "few news stories are completely nonpolitical," and indeed

politics does run through virtually all news reporting. Nelson rightfully reports that civic educators need to show students how pervasive the presence of politics and government is in public and even private life. Nelson recognizes this when he states that even stories about airplane crashes have "political aspects."

Realizing the political aspects of seemingly nonpolitical news can lead to discovering the presence of politics and government throughout daily lives. Political phenomenon are found not only in all sections of the daily newspaper but also in the everyday activities of schools themselves. The operations of schools feature many of the processes and concepts whose understanding is necessary for civic competence outside the school. For example, skills of communication, analysis, and decisionmaking are needed. The concepts of authority, rules and rule making, bureaucracy, and influence, both by individuals and groups, are manifested in the schools as well as in newspapers, television, and the external world.

Professor Nelson does rightly point out that education and politics are inextricably intertwined, citing news media reports of teacher strikes, Agriculture Department guidelines on school lunches, and political action groups influencing the inclusion or exclusion of various elements in the curriculum. Most certainly these explicit political phenomenon involving schools, that is, the so called "politics of education," are quite common. That schools are major players in explicitly political activities helps bring politics closer to the everyday lives of students, but there are also political processes occurring within schools which also can be used as sources of political information for civic education.

Issues arise on campus, within the school's walls, or even within classrooms, which in essence are political situations and which manifest general

political phenomenon and concepts. Most obvious are the activities of student governments or student councils. These involve campaigns, elections, and the legislative process. However, relatively few students are usually directly involved in council participation, and student governments often are much less involved in deciding major school issues than is the school administration.

In order to be more inclusive, one can conceptualize the school as a political system. This is most clear when there exists a controversy about a particular policy issue which must be resolved. For example, perhaps a "no smoking" or "limited area smoking" policy is being considered. If the school is an authoritarian system, a small group of individuals will make the binding decisions (policies) with little or no participation by the student citizenry. In a more democratic system, students and teachers will communicate, perhaps organize interests pro and con, and attempt to exert influence in various ways on the leaders having the decisionmaking authority. Those who have the best communication, the smartest strategies, and can mobilize the most resources, are most likely to exert a deciding influence on the outcome of the controversy. The skills learned through participation in the resolution of such a conflict can be generalized by the civics educator to participation in the society outside the school.

Bureaucratic Politics

An important point is made when Professor Nelson states that, by and large, Americans do not get schooling in competency in dealing with bureaucratic systems, yet the average person is in frequent contact with bureaucracies. Civic education typically teaches students very little about how the bureaucratic agencies of government work, yet all of us realize that many of our political dealings are not directly with elected or appointed government

officials but rather with "street level bureaucracy," that is, those local public servants who are engaged in the implementation of our public policies. This includes agency clerks, law enforcement officers, field service workers, etc. The media often make several references to bureaucracy, most particularly the federal administrative departments and agencies. Yet, media stories dealing with state, local, or national agencies typically say little or nothing about how these agencies operate and even less about how citizens can deal effectively with their operations.

However, to return to our point about political processes within the schools, bureaucratic organizations exist much closer to students' lives than do even the motor vehicle department, the Selective Service agency, or the Department of Education. Most schools themselves manifest many bureaucratic aspects. Students often run up against what may seem to be arbitrary rules and regulations, officious behavior, nonresponsiveness, buck passing, and many of the other frustrations which also exist in external bureaucratic agencies. These experiences can be used to teach lessons about what bureaucracies are, how they operate, and how individuals can successfully deal with and influence those operations.

Judicial Decisionmaking

Professor Nelson also mentions how newspapers and television write and show a great deal about courts and yet do little to explain how courts and the judicial system operate, how courts actually make policy, and how citizens influence and are influenced by court decisions. Certainly, the typical civics curricula should include more about courts as policy makers. It is probable that many citizens will have more direct interactions with our justice system than they will with, for example, the congressional system. Yet, civics curricula generally are not strong in this area of decisionmaking,

that is, the resolution of value conflict through judging the relative merits of competing cases and handing down a binding decision. Again, this procedure, although not officially titled "judicial," is found in many of our schools.

Global Curriculum for the Schools

One of the major emphases of effective citizenship education these days must be "internationalization." The interdependence of peoples and political entities throughout the world is increasing rapidly as technology is in the vanguard of bringing us together. The media are some of these technologies, and television and newspapers have been major contributors to direct and indirect knowledge about international affairs. This may be one area where the use of media in civic education is particularly appropriate. Television in particular literally brings the "global village"--international people, places, and events--into the homes of civics students. Schools too often miss this marvelous opportunity for using the magic of television to bring other nations and other peoples into the classroom.

When students view actual televised world events at home, too often little explanation or analysis occurs. Schools often fail to follow up on this global exposure by explicating world news through the use of the hypotheses and analyses of social scientists. Two of the major related areas of political science are (1) comparative politics and (2) international relations. Extensive research in these subdisciplines over the decades has contributed a great deal of information and many theories which can be used to aid comprehension of international events in the civic classroom. Yet too much reliance may be placed on a formal study of comparative political systems or economic systems. Even inherently intriguing "area studies" often are surprisingly dull in their classroom format.

Schools may fail to help students understand their own relationship to what is going on in the world. These global events can also be related to what happens in the school and in the community. This was most obvious, and most tragic, with regard to the Vietnam War, which provided a great opportunity for civic education about many aspects of our society and other nations. Yet schools by and large failed to educate students in the late 1960s and early 1970s about the war, to help them understand what was going on and why it was going on, and to place it in a broader international, historic, and economic context. In short, an international perspective was not promoted by the schools, a great failure of civic education of that period.

Need for Numbers

Finally, Professor Nelson discusses how the polls which proliferate during presidential years, and other statistical data, can be used to teach general skills of quantitative analysis. Assuredly students must be able to separate good information from bad information, accurate from invalid data, and leading from misleading statistics, in order to have an accurate picture of the world in which they live. Modern citizenship competence requires skill in at least basic mathematics and economics. However, again the data analyzed need not only be that found in TV and newspapers' reporting of external occurrences. There is a great deal of statistical and numerical information available about schools and students, such as the number of students, their median age and other demographic characteristics, and their accomplishments on various tasks--tests, athletics, etc. Simple but representative public opinion polls can be conducted, and perhaps ought to be conducted, by classes about schools issues. The conduct and analysis of a school-based poll on school issues can teach virtually all the essentials of statistical fallacies, and problems of sampling and representativeness, which major

network and newspaper polls are very likely to gloss over. The appropriate role of "the people's voice" in a political system can also be discussed or illustrated through such an activity.

Summary Observations

In sum, using the media is indeed an excellent and underutilized way to bring the reality and diversity of external politics into the classroom. It is a method which has been underutilized but which is particularly appropriate for our very media-oriented students. Additionally, however, there is a great deal of political content occurring in the everyday life of schools which generally is not recognized as such. While the media can be very useful objects for teaching such competencies as the acquiring and using of information, making judgments, and communicating these concepts, these and others can also be utilized as they are manifested within the school. Using the rich diversity which is found in modern news media not only would make civics education more interesting and lively, it would also add to the global education which our students will increasingly require in the future. But even this is not enough, because the limitations of the media will result in their necessarily being used primarily to fill a comprehension gap which, although it should be filled, is not the totality of civic education.

The media largely reflect a reality which is external to the schools. Using that external reality in combination with the internal reality of the schools as political communities can provide a much more complete and realistic civic education, one that will build civic competencies which can be used by student-citizens while in school as well as after their school experience.